



Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)

Volume 11 Issue 2, Fall 2021

ISSN_P: 2075-0943, ISSN_E: 2520-0313

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.11.2>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/JITC>

Journal QR Code:



Article:

Behavioural Revival of the Arabs through Psychological Method of ‘Shaping’: A Discourse Analysis

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Published:

Fall 2021

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.11.2.14>

QR Code:



Muhammad Atif

Citation:

Rao, Muhammad Atif Aslam, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, and Saqib Muhammad Khan. “Behavioural revival of the Arabs through psychological method of ‘Shaping’: A discourse analysis.” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 2 (2021): 258–268.

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Publisher Information:

Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

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Behavioural Revival of the Arabs through Psychological Method of ‘Shaping’: A Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

In pre-Islamic era, the Arabs practiced many vices and abominable acts which were extremely harmful for the individuals as well as the society. The evil practices and habits were a direct result of the Arabs’ polytheistic beliefs which had cast negative impact on every aspect of their lives and collective behaviour. The abominations were so deeply entrenched in their psyche that it was next to impossible to break their habits within a short span of time and replace them with new and better ones. So, the Qur’ān and Prophet’s shariah adopted gradual approach to reform the character of entire Arabia and this approach is called ‘shaping’ in modern psychology. It is a process of learning a certain behaviour in a gradual manner through a series of reinforcements. Thus, the Arabs did not quit all their vices at once just after a single order; it took a certain period of time as the Qur’ān gradually revealed instructions as per the recipients’ psychological preparedness and finally brought about a revival which was unprecedented in the history of mankind. This article explains the conditions, habits and difficulties found in pre-Islam Arabs’ lifestyle and how the Qur’ān and shariah exercised ‘shaping’ to reform them.

Keywords: shaping, psychological conditions, history of mankind, behavioral revival

Introduction

The Pre-Islam Arabs practiced many vices and were indulged in many atrocious activities which were highly damaging for them on individual as well as collective level. That era is usually called jāhiliyyah (ignorance) and the term found in the Qur’ān several times. Allah says:

Then he sent down upon you-after sorrow-security, a sleepiness enveloping a company among you, while a company were anxious over themselves, thinking

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about God what is not true-the thinking of the Age of Ignorance.¹

This is one of four verses counselling Muslims to abandon the ways of pre-Islamic Arabia, referred to as the Age of Ignorance called the *jāhiliyyah* or the age of destructive behaviour. In addition, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: Would you return to the practices of the times of the ignorance [before Islam], though I am among you, and God has honoured you with Islam and reconciled your hearts?²

A clear delineation of *jāhiliyyah* was given by Ja‘far bin Abī Tālib as he stood up and addressed the king Negus in the following words:

O King! we were plunged in the depth of ignorance and barbarism; we adored idols, we lived in unchastity, we ate the dead bodies, and we spoke abominations, we disregarded every feeling of humanity, and the duties of hospitality and neighbourhood were neglected; we knew no law but that of the strong”³

It clearly indicates that the pre-Islamic Arabian society was not an organized in many ways. Polytheism and worship of idols became the most prominent feature of the religion of society. Majid Khan in his book *Muhammad the Final Messenger* writes: The Sixth Century A.D., found them plunged into depravity, perversion and dark idolatry and indulging in all the other characteristics of primitive life.”⁴

Their false beliefs and polytheistic ideas were at the root of such evil practices which had consumed their lives and cast a bad impact on overall behaviour of the society. The vices had hardened into habits which had almost become second nature to them hence nearly impossible to change at once. The Qur’ān describes the transformation as a gradual movement from the darkness to the light. This verse expresses one of the key concepts of the Qur’ān, known as “Qur’ān is the light.” It reads “He it is Who sends down clear signs upon His servant to bring you out of darkness into light, and truly God is Kind and Merciful unto you.”⁵

Regarding the many implications of this phrase, Ibn ‘Ajībāh writes, “out of the darkness of sin into the light of repentance and righteousness; out of the darkness of heedlessness into the light of wakefulness; out of the darkness of desire and selfishness

¹Āl ‘Imrān 3:154. See also 5:50, 33:33 and 48:26. Translation of Qur’ānic verses are from Seyyed Hossein Nasar, Cancer K. Dagli, Maria Masi Dakake, Joseph E.B. Lumbard and Mohemmed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), unless otherwise mentioned.

²Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Quran and its Interpreters* (New York: The State University, 1994), 2/273.

³Ṣafīūr Raḥmān al Mubārakpūrī, *Ar-Raheeq Al-Makhtum* translated in english by Issam Diab by the title *The Sealed Nectar* (Riyadh: Dar us Salam Publications, 1996), 103.

⁴Majed Khan, *Muhammad the Final Messenger* (Delhi: Idārahi Ādabiyāt, 1980), 31.

⁵al-Ḥadīd 57:9.

into the light of renunciation and purity; out of the darkness of the sensual into the light of the spiritual; out of the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge through God.”⁶

Quite naturally, the Qur’ān adopted gradual process to reform the character of the entire Arabia. It is therefore wrong to perceive that the Arabs quit all their bad habits and shunned all vices just after receiving a single order. It took a certain period and stepwise series of injunctions to help break their habits and replace them with better ones. The method is called ‘shaping’ in *psychology for behavioural reform*.

The psychology says that a great deal of our behaviour is developed and maintained because it is regularly reinforced.⁷ The process of developing a certain behaviour gradually through a series of reinforcements is termed shaping which is described by Karen Huffman in the book *Psychology in Action* has, “Shaping teaches the desired response by reinforcing a series of successive steps leading to the final goal response. It is especially effective for teaching novel behaviours that aren’t likely to occur naturally.”⁸

The psychologists elaborate that a full-fledged behaviour management program has a series of levels, each requiring increasingly novel behaviour. For example, patients might at first be given some gifts for merely attending group therapy sessions. Once this behaviour is established, they would be rewarded only for actually participating in the sessions. Eventually, the process of giving gifts could be discontinued when the patient receives the reinforcement of being helped by participation in the therapy sessions. Here patients are not directly compelled to participate in the sessions. However, they are gradually made to participate in the sessions by stepwise reinforcement. This whole phenomenon is known as shaping which is recommended to be employed for the change in behaviour.⁹

Thus, shaping is defined as, “The process of reinforcing responses that come successively closer to the desired response.”¹⁰ Shaping involves reinforcement for successive approximations of the desired response.¹¹

In behaviour therapy, a behaviour to be acquired is called the *target behaviour*: shaping – being rewarded for successive approximations of the target behaviour – is one operant technique for eventually performing the target behaviour.

⁶Nasar, Dagli, Dakake, Lumbard, Rustom, *The Study Qur’ān: A New Translation and Commentary*, al-Ḥadīd 57:9.

⁷D. A. Bernstein, L. A. Penner, A. C. Stewart, and Roy E. J., *Psychology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 211.

⁸Karen Huffman, Katherine Dowdell, Catherine A. Sanderson, *Psychology in Action* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004), 217.

⁹*Ibid.*, 542.

¹⁰Penner Bernstein, Clarke-Stewart, Roy, *Psychology*, 211.

¹¹Karen Huffman, *Psychology in Action*, 237.

We find the best application of shaping in the behavioural reformation of the Arabs. The practice of drinking alcohol and gambling were an integral part of the Arab society before Islam. No celebration or festival was considered complete without alcohol, and those who abstained from consuming wine and avoided gambling were termed as niggardly and cowards.¹² Hence it was almost beyond imagination to persuade them to come out of their system.

Therefore, unlike matters of faith in which the Qur'ān gives specific and definite pronouncements, the book took a more pragmatic and measured approach towards alcohol and gambling in order to prepare ground for smoother adoption and implementation. So, by making use of the operant conditioning (shaping) of psychology, the Qur'ān first declares gambling and drinking do have some benefits but their harms outweigh the benefits. "They ask thee about wine and gambling. Say "In them there is great sin and [some] benefits for mankind, but their sin is greater than their benefit." ¹³

This verse constituted the first step towards a complete ban on drinking and gambling in the Muslim society. There were some people who were already not so fond of them while others gave them up after being admonished.¹⁴ Sayyid Qutb says in his comments on the above verse; "Drinking and gambling are well-entrenched social habits that required careful treatment. The first step was to raise in people's minds an inner consciousness of their harmful effects, advising that they would better be avoided."¹⁵

The second step came at a later stage and the Muslims were advised not to offer their prayers when in a state of intoxication as commanded, "O you who believe! Draw not near unto prayer when you are drunken until you know what you are uttering."¹⁶

The companions readily understood that if the supreme worship of ṣalāt cannot be performed in a state of intoxication, then there can be nothing good about it. Sayyid Qutb in his commentary *Fi Zilāl al-Qur'ān* says, "There are five prayers to be performed at set times every day. The time interval between one prayer and the next is not long enough for a drinking person to regain sobriety. This restricts the opportunity to drink and helps habitual drinkers to give it up altogether."¹⁷

¹²The most detailed history of pre-Islamic Arab may be found in Jawād 'Alī, *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tarīkh al-'Arab qabla al-Islām* (10 vols., Beirut, 1971).

¹³Al-Baqarah 2:219.

¹⁴Ameer Muhammad Akram Awan, *Asrār At-Tanzīl*, English translation by Ms. A. Irfan, www.English-tafseer.com, al-Baqarah 2:219, accessed 12-08-2020.

¹⁵Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, English Translation 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān' by Adil Silahi, (UK: Islamic Foundation, 2003), 1:281.

¹⁶An-Nisa 4:43.

¹⁷Qutb, *In the Shade of Qur'ān*, 1:281.

Finally, the fourth and in the last came complete prohibition of alcohol, “O you who believe! Wine, and gambling, and idols, and divining arrows are but a means of defilement, of Satan’s doing. So avoid it, that haply you may prosper.”¹⁸

The moment the above verses were revealed, all the Muslims renounced alcohol completely and all the liquor stored in houses was poured down the drain and onto streets so much so that whenever it rained even after years, the colour of alcohol would appear on the surface together with its stench.¹⁹

Ameer Muhammad Akram Awan in his commentary, *Asrār At-Tanzīl* writes about this, “The Prophet (peace be upon him) commanded that anyone possessing alcohol should deposit it at a given place. The companions immediately complied. He went there and cut open some of the leather containers personally while ordering the companions to waste the rest. One of the companions who used to import wine had gone to Syria to buy it with all his savings. On his return, he asked for the Prophet (peace be upon him) word, who said that all the wine was to be wasted away by cutting open the containers. He spilt all his investment without the least hesitation.”²⁰

Hence, the Qur’ān prepared the believers by applying operant conditioning of shaping to not only denounce alcohol but also accept the prohibition with complete submission and willingness. But when the believers had had this sufficient psychological training the Qur’ān ordered prohibition of alcohol and enforced it strictly. Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have cursed ten people; the one who extracts wine, the one who drinks it, the one who offers it, the one who brings it, the one for whom it is brought, the manufacturer, the seller, the customer, the one who gifts and the one who lives on the income accrued from it.²¹ Moreover, the ban on intoxicating beverages includes not only their consumption, but also their sale and any profit attained by it.

The pre-Islam Arab society suffered from another moral disease apart from the evil practices of gambling and usury, that was of the status of women. The women were at the lowest rung in the society and were accorded no better treatment than was meted out to despicable animals as Lebon remarked “Men, before the dawn of Islam, used to consider the position of women as midway between animals and human beings, and her role either as a servant or captive.”²²

The atrocious practice of female infanticide has become the ultimate symbol of women’s oppression in pre-Islamic Arabia. Qur’ān says: “And when one of them receives

¹⁸Al-Maida 5:90.

¹⁹Awan, *Asrār At-Tanzīl*, al-Baqarah 2:219.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājāh al-Rab‘ī al-Qazwīnī, *Sunan Ibn-e-Mājāh*, Chapters on Drinks, “Wine is cursed from ten angles,” Book 30, Hadith 10.

²²Gustave Le Bon, *La Civilisation des Arabes*, translated in Arabic by Adil Zu‘aitir by the title *Haḍārat al-‘Arab*, (Cairo: Hindāwī foundation for education and culture, 2012), 15.

tidings of a female [child], his face darkens, and he is choked with anguish. He hides from the people on account of the evil of the tidings he has been given. Shall he keep it in humiliation, or bury it in the dust? Behold! Evil indeed is the judgment they make!"²³

The birth of a daughter in a family was taken as a form of humiliation and infanticide of girls was rampant. The pagan Arabs used to bury their daughters alive in extreme cases. The women were used only for one purpose, as sex objects, and then thrown away. They enjoyed no freedom, they could not own property and were not permitted to inherit from any close relative in the family. In times of war, women were treated as part of the booty and were considered part of property to be shared among sons after the death of their father. In short, women were not regarded as human beings, they were a sort of sub-species between humans and animals.

Hence, being widow in pre-Islamic age was a curse because of the barbaric, inhumane and savagely brutal treatment meted out to them. After the death of her husband, the widow was kicked out of the house and forced to live for the duration of a year in a little shack, which was dark with very poor ventilation. This 'waiting period' was called the *Iddat* during which she was not permitted to leave the hut, nor was she allowed to take a bath or change clothes. After the end of the prescribed period, she was allowed to come out of the hut and people would heave camel dung at her lap and ask her to rub her body against the body of an animal. Then she was forced to go round the village in the same dirty attire, throwing the camel dung on her right and her left. This was the indication that she had completed her *Iddat*.²⁴

According to Zainab Bint Jaḥsh as reported in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*:

When a lady was bereaved of her husband, she would live in a wretched small room and put on the worst clothes she had and would not touch any scent till one year had elapsed. Then she would bring an animal, e.g. a donkey, a sheep or a bird and rub her body against it. The animal against which she would rub her body would scarcely survive. Only then she would come out of her room, whereupon she would be given a ball of dung which she would throw away and then she would use the scent she liked or the like.²⁵

This extremely inhumane and painfully cruel practice was abolished by Almighty Allah with the help of the same operant conditioning of shaping in two steps. In the first step, duration of the waiting period was left intact as the Arabs were accustomed to it and it was very hard to change the overall pattern of *Iddat* abruptly. So, the Qur'ān did not change the period of *Iddat* but sought to modify the accompanying rituals by emphasizing humane treatment towards widows; "Those of you who die and leave widows should bequeath for their widows a year's maintenance and residence; but if they leave (The

²³Al-Naḥl 58:59.

²⁴Nasar, Dagli, Dakake, Lombard, Rustom, *The Study Qur'ān: A New Translation and Commentary*, al-Baqarah 2:234.

²⁵Muḥammad bin Ismā'il Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, The Book of Divorce (63), Hadīth No. 251.

residence), there is no blame on you for what they do with themselves, provided it is reasonable. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.”²⁶

Maulānā Shabbir Aḥmad ‘Usmānī says in his commentary on the above verse; “This order was given in the beginning, but after the revelation of the verse of inheritance, in which the share of woman was also fixed and the term of *Iddat* in case of death of husband fixed at four months and 10 days, the order in the current verse was abrogated.”²⁷

In the first step of the shaping process to attain the final goal response the Qur’ān freed women of the Arabian society from the cruelty of prevalent *Iddat*. In the second step, the term of *Iddat* was redefined and shortened to further relieve women of the burdens put on her by evil customs.

Almighty Allah states in Surah Al-Baqarah, “And those among you who are taken by death and leave behind wives, let them wait by themselves four months and ten days. And when they have fulfilled their term, then there is no blame upon you in what they do concerning themselves in an honorable way. And God is Aware of whatsoever you do.”²⁸ Shabbir Aḥmad ‘Usmānī says while describing the above verse; “In this verse, the term of *Iddat* in case of death of the husband is described as four months and ten days. If within this period it is known that the woman is not pregnant she would be permitted to remarry after *Iddat*, otherwise after delivery... As a matter of fact, the term of three monthly courses or four months and ten days is determined to know and wait for pregnancy.”²⁹

In contrast to the waiting period outlined here, it is related that in pre-Islamic times widows were often required to wait a year, observing such practices as wearing their worst clothes, neither grooming nor bathing, and marking the end of their mourning by leaving their house; the end of the mourning period was marked by flinging a piece of animal dung and rubbing the front of their bodies with an animal, acts of unclear significance.³⁰

Hence, through the gradual process of shaping, Allah reinforced the Arab nation for the change in their attitude towards a widow in two successive steps and finally presented a refined program of *Iddat* during which woman should not wear coloured clothes, she should not apply collyrium (*Surma*) to the eyelids, she should also avoid applying *Henna*, she must give up wearing ornaments, jewels, gold, silver, silken clothes, nor apply perfume on the clothes or the body, even if it be an odourless oil nor comb the hair. The clothes in hues of saffron and red should also be avoided. However, she could wear the old and worn

²⁶Al-Baqarah 2: 240.

²⁷Shabbir Aḥmad ‘Usmānī, *Tafseer-e-Usmani*, English Translation ‘*The Noble Qur’ān*’ by Mohammad Ashfaq Aḥmad, Vol. 1, (Karachi: Darul-Isha’at Publishers, 1999), 137.

²⁸Al-Baqarah 2:234.

²⁹Aḥmad, *The Noble Qur’ān*, 1/133.

³⁰Nasar, Dagli, Dakake, Lumbard, Rustom, *The Study Qur’ān: A New Translation and Commentary*, al-Baqarah 2:234.

dress of fading colours as well as the clothes of black colour, provided these were not silken or other fibres which resembled silk and had shine.

In case of headache or pain in the eyes, she could apply hair oil or collyrium to get relief from the pain. Contrary to the pre-Islamic customs, it was advisable for a woman to complete the term of her *Iddat* in the same house in which she was living at the time of her husband's death, unless there was some serious matter issue over which she had no control and she was compelled to leave or vacate the house. Moreover, the widow can be allowed to go out during daytime to earn her livelihood if she had no other choice for her subsistence. But she would have to spend the night at home.³¹

Taking into consideration the conditions obtaining with regard to status of woman among the Arabs, it is not difficult to evaluate how large a debt of gratitude woman owes to the Qur'ān which lifted her up from the depths of lowliness to a high position of respect and dignity. In that, the Qur'ān stands unrivalled in the history of the world for its service to humankind.

This was the method with the help of which the Qur'ān brought about an unprecedented behavioural reformation in the Arabs through gradual revelations. The issues which required to be addressed immediately were stated instantly with immediate effects such as matters of belief and faith. However, in order to bring about change in the behaviour and attitude, the Qur'ān adopted the psychological method of shaping which brought about highly positive results and the world witnessed that the very people in whose psyche immoral habits and inhumane practices were so deeply entrenched had had a complete change of heart and they became pillars of piety and goodness in the society. In this gradual manner, the Qur'ān eliminated all evils and vices from the Arab society and turned it into God conscious, pious society.

In the course of behavioural reformation of the Arabs, the first and the foremost method of the Qur'ān was to overwhelm and impress the Arabs, who took great pride in being eloquent and experts in use of linguistic skills. They considered themselves as unrivalled and superior to all in this field, therefore, they could only be overwhelmed by a man that could match or defeat them in this arena. Hence, the Qur'ān which established itself as the first and the unique miracle of the Prophet (peace be upon him) showed its linguistic supremacy and literary gems which attracted the pagan Arabs. They were highly impressed and compelled to believe that the Qur'ān was not a word of any human but it was revealed by the Lord of the worlds.

Though idol worship was the worst practice among the then Arabs and was the fundamental cause of all evils prevalent among their society, which required immediate falsification of idols to bring the Arabs to the worship of only One God, the Qur'ān refuted idol worship and all associated practices and beliefs without mincing words and did not

³¹Saqib Muhammad Khan, *Analytical study of Qur'ānic Concepts of Human Behaviors*. (unpublished PhD dissertation in pdf), University of Karachi, 2014), 154.

apply gradual process in this case. The Qur'ān addressed this issue like a psychotherapist and first reformed the most glaring evil which served as the most successful step towards making them understand the absurdity of the idol worship and diverting the thinking and ideology of the Arabs to the truth, bringing them ever closer to Islam.

After showing them the right path, the Qur'ān applied one of the most significant factors of psychology i.e., motivation to encourage people to do good and righteous deeds. Through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the Qur'ān diverted people from false beliefs and wrongdoings and made them incline towards righteousness. In this regard, the Qur'ān applied the most practical psychological technique termed as 'manipulation' which threatens those who deny the truth and disobey Allah with severe torment and unbearable punishment and gives good tidings of profound rewards and sublime luxuries to those who accept the righteous faith and obey Almighty Allah.

The Qur'ān uses the element of manipulation in a repeated and persistent manner to bring about positive change in the behaviour of the Arabs to the extent that they forsook all false beliefs for good and became highly motivated for practicing noble deeds.

In the final analysis, some evil practices were deeply entrenched in the Arab psyche that they had almost become a second nature to individuals and an unquestionable part of lifestyle and overall behaviour of the society. Hence, it was next to impossible to change them overnight. The Qur'ān, therefore, reformed the behaviour of the entire Arabia through gradual revelations. Through a stepwise series of injunctions, they were made to avoid vices and change their attitude towards good. This process is termed shaping in psychology.

That was how the reformation took place in the Arabia. People were first persuaded to believe that the Qur'ān was a revealed Book of Allah and a guide for their betterment. Afterwards, the idol worship was falsified and Arabs were brought to believe in the oneness of Allah. At this stage, they were motivated for doing righteous deeds and continuously warned against consequences of disobedience to Allah and denial of the truth. The Qur'ān did reveal some clear verses to establish fundamental facts and change overall mindset and behaviour of the Arabs like the belief in one God but in all other matters that pertained to deeply entrenched evil habits, the Qur'ān gradually revealed instructions as per psychological condition and preparedness of the recipients which helped bring about a revival still regarded unprecedented in the history of mankind.

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